15th Sunday after Trinity (Year A)
'When life takes a U-turn'

On 21st June 1999 I left the security of a good career in the Ministry of Defence to begin my dream job. It was to be an adventure that would take me to the four corners of the world. It all began a year or so before when I heard about the ministry of two Christians - an Assemblies of God pastor and a Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords. In a powerful presentation I listened to stories how they risked their lives to travel to some of the most dangerous countries in the world to visit and show solidarity with Christians undergoing extreme hardship and persecution because of their faith in Christ. The two meticulously documented and publicised the most horrendous human rights abuses to the media, House of Lords and Parliament. I was memorised, as was the rest of the audience. At the end of the event, I expressed my admiration for all that they were doing. For weeks after, I couldn't get the images of suffering that I had seen and felt something that I hadn't felt before, that God was calling me to do the same.

To cut a long story short, on spec I sent my CV to the charity and was surprised to find that they suggested that I apply for the post of International Projects Director; a role that had previously been held by former SAS trooper and first man in to the Iranian Embassy - Frank Collins. Amazingly I got the job!

For three years, I travelled the world organising advocacy and aid missions to persecuted Christians living in conflict zones including war torn Southern Sudan, the Armenian enclave of Nagorno Karabakh and to the Karen and Karenni living in the dense jungle along the Thai/Burma border.

Then one day the charity's board unexpectedly announced that it was going to disband its international projects department, my post was disbanded and I was moved sideways. I was both angry and frustrated. Why had God called me to serve him in this way only for the plug to be pulled? What followed was one of the darkest periods of my working life. In 2004, I reluctantly resigned and returned to my former employer – the MOD.

God however, had other plans for me and within a year I had been selected for training for ordained ministry. The rest is history.

I can now look back and see God's hand on my life and that all I had done and experienced for those 4 years were not wasted. What about you? How do you react when life takes a U-turn and the outcome is not what you expected?

Both our Old and New Testament readings offer us a glimpse into the character of God. Jonah did not immediately respond to the call of God to go to Nineveh and challenge its people regarding their wickedness. It took a period of resistance, suffering and an intimate encounter with a large fish for God to eventually coerce Jonah to obey the call. He eventually responded and preached God's word to the city of Nineveh and guess what? The people responded and repented.

But the outcome was not quite what Jonah had anticipated and he took it badly - he was both angry with God and suicidal (Jonah 3:4). Even though he thought knew in his heart God's divine character: "… for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. "(3:2).

Jonah took himself outside of the city made a shelter and sat and waited to see what God would do to the city (i.e. destroy it). God provided him some shade in the form of a bush to help alleviate his misery (4:6) but this comfort was not to last for long as a worm soon ate it and it withered. Jonah's response once again turned to anger and suicidal thoughts (3:8-9). This reaction says more about Jonah than it does about God. Jonah was more concerned about the minutiae of his own immediate personal situation whilst God cared about the bigger picture - the lives of some 120,000 people of Nineveh 'who did not know their left hand from their right'. (4:11).

In Jesus' parable of the kingdom of heaven, we have another example of God acting in a way that may be somewhat at variance with what we might expect. In the story the labourers who put in a full day's work were angry that the late arrivals, some of whom only worked for an hour who were given the same remuneration.

By human standards it did appear somewhat unjust. However, it was ultimately up to the owner of the vineyard (God) to decide whether or not to be generous and how he would recompense his workers. He decided that <u>everyone</u> would receive the daily wage offered to the

first labourers. I am reminded of the following verses from Isaiah 55:8-9:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,"
declares the Lord.
9 "As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Today, in the midst of the current COVID-19 crisis, many of us are seeking to discern what God might be saying to us. Over the last couple of weeks you have been invited to do a little theological reflection yourselves based around three questions: What are we noticing of God's movement at this difficult time? What are we learning as we reflect on how God seems to be moving? What might we let go or allow to die so that we may enter into a new future with God? Do let us know you're the fruit of your prayerful reflections.

As I have said many times before in my sermons, change is an inevitable fact of life. It's how we react to it matters. Do we resist what is happening or do we go with the flow in faith and trust? This week I came across an apposite quote from the spiritual writer and speaker Eckhart Tolle:

> 'To offer no resistance to life is to be in a state of grace, ease and lightness. This state is then no longer dependent upon things being in a certain way, good, or bad'

Do we believe that God is sovereign and that everything that is happening has an ultimate purpose even when life appears to take a U-turn?

Rev Andrew Jacobson
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